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ABSTRACT

A needs assessment evaluated the informational needs that state directors of special education will have following the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Data on information needs were gathered at a meeting of the National Association of State Directors of Special Education's Board of Directors in June 1996. Content information needs identified by the Board included: a clear explanation of the statutory changes in the new IDEA; a full copy of the new law; and a summary of changes that will have the most significant effect on school-level staff. Content format needs identified at the meeting included: a side-by-side presentation of the old and new provisions of the law; a list highlighting major changes; an annotated presentation on the impact of each major change on policy or procedure; a one-page list of major changes arranged by date detailing what has to be in place for each revision and the deadline; and mini-reports that focus on specific topics. Also identified were presentation format needs such as written documents, electronic versions, postings on the Internet, tape recordings, and Braille versions. Other issues in the development and dissemination of information, such as the writing and promulgation of revised IDEA regulations, were also identified. (CR)

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NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT

by

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Final Report
Year 4 Deliverable for Task 3
Under Contract No. HS92015001
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Prepared for:
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Project FORUM at National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) is a contract funded by the Office of Special Education Programs of the U. S. Department of Education. The project carries out a variety of activities that provide information needed for program improvement, and promote the utilization of research data and other information for improving outcomes for students with disabilities. The project also provides technical assistance and information on emerging issues, and convenes small work groups to gather expert input, obtain feedback, and develop conceptual frameworks related to critical topics in special education.

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State Directors of Special Education:

Richard Baldwin, Michigan

Martha Brooks, Delaware

John Corpolongo, Oklahoma

Bill East, Alabama

John Herner, Ohio

Gail Lieberman, Illinois

Tom Neveldine, New York

Fred Smokoski, Colorado

David Stockford, Maine

NASDSE Staff:

Martha Fields, Executive Director

Smokey Davis, Associate Director

TASK 3 NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT

INTRODUCTION

Project FORUM's Task 3

The activity for Task 3 of Project FORUM is formally entitled "Identification of Information Needed for Program Improvement." It was designed to assist the U. S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in meeting the requirement in Section 618 of Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): "to develop and implement a process for the on-going identification of national program information needed for improving the management, administration, delivery, and effectiveness of programs and services under the Act." A variety of activities have been used by Project FORUM to achieve the goal of this task in past years of this contract, the most recent being an analysis of the documentation produced by other projects funded to perform similar information generation and dissemination activities. That summary analysis, completed for Years 2 and 3 of the FORUM, built on the work of the National Information Action Center (NIAC), a COSMOS Corporation study, and the work of the Federal and Regional Resource Centers.

The analysis performed last year categorized information needs as moderate, strong or strongest according to the reports of the other needs-identification projects. The five areas of greatest need according to that analysis were: Compliance and Monitoring, Early Childhood, Finance, Inclusion and LRE, Personnel and CSPD, and Procedural Safeguards. The report also stressed the finding of the COSMOS study that specific information needs of State Education Agencies (SEAs) are dynamic, and impacted by a variety of political, organizational and programmatic forces at the federal, state and local levels. The influence of that finding, that was strongly supported by other needs assessments, influenced the choice of this year's method for completing Task 3.

For Year 4, it was decided that the needs assessment activity should relate directly to the reauthorization of IDEA. Although the process of reauthorization has extended far beyond original expectations, many significant changes will be needed in state special education procedures once the revisions are ratified. There will be a critical need for detailed information immediately upon completion of that process so that SEAs can prepare to implement changes in a timely manner. It was decided that input was necessary from State

Directors about the form and substance of that information to meet that need in the most effective and efficient way.

Method for Year 4 Activity

A unique opportunity for gathering the data for this needs assessment was made available to Project FORUM when the NASDSE Board of Directors agreed to include this topic on the agenda of their meeting held on June 22, 1966 in Bar Harbor, Maine. Participants in the discussion included:

State Directors of Special Education:

Richard Baldwin, Michigan
Martha Brooks, Delaware
John Corpolongo, Oklahoma
Bill East, Alabama
John Herner, Ohio
Gail Lieberman, Illinois
Tom Neveldine, New York
Fred Smokoski, Colorado
David Stockford, Maine

NASDSE Staff:

Martha Fields, Executive Director
Smokey Davis, Associate Director

Prior to the meeting, Project FORUM staff prepared a list of questions to initiate and guide the discussion. They are as follows:

- What will SEAs need <u>first</u> in the way of information about the reauthorization after it is passed? Would it be important to provide a full copy of the new law with revisions highlighted? Would it be more useful to have a summary of the changes? Other suggestions?

- What format would be most useful for the information: a side-by-side presentation with the old and new provisions? a topically organized list of the new provisions? Other suggestions?
- Are there selected major topics that need special treatment such as: the effects of the changes on monitoring? revisions in data collection requirements? Other topics?

- What is the best way to deliver this information to SEAs: printed materials? E-mail? the Directors Board on SpecialNet? on a computer disk? Other vehicles?

- What other issues related to the sharing of information at this critical time should we consider in order to be more responsive to SEA needs?

This list was sent to the Board members with their agenda and other meeting materials, and they were requested to be prepared to participate in the discussion about their state's information needs relative to a reauthorized IDEA.

Since the meeting was being held out of town, NASDSE's Executive Director agreed to lead the discussion so that the project did not have to incur the expense of sending a staff member to the meeting. Plans were made with the Maine SEA staff to record the discussion in order to facilitate analysis of the information for this report.

The meeting was held as planned. The discussion was successfully taped, and FORUM staff transcribed the contents. The remainder of this report contains a summary and analysis of that material, and a discussion of its implications for meeting the information needs of SEAs upon the passage of a revised IDEA.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The discussion of information needs upon IDEA reauthorization yielded valuable indicators in terms of the content and formats that would be most valuable, as well as other conditions that would contribute to the usefulness of information to be provided on this topic. The following is a summary and analysis of the points covered in the discussion.

Information Needs: Content

State Directors indicated a need for four types of information. The discussion suggested the following priority for that information:

1) a clear explanation of the statutory changes in the new IDEA including:

    a) the effective date for each provision if there are different time frames for the implementation of different sections of the law;

    b) an indication of which changes will become effective without further rules, and which ones will not be implemented until regulations are written.

2) a full copy of the law as soon as possible after it is signed by the President;

3) a summary focused on changes that will have the most significant effect on school-level staff; and,

4) special information focused on major topics of the changes.

Information Needs: Content Format

Directors emphasized the importance of providing information in a variety of formats given the different preferences for effective communication and the diverse uses for that material. The desired formats are:

1) a *side by side* presentation giving the old and new versions of provisions of the law. (Discussants noted the value of this format that NASDSE has used in providing information about the various bills that have been filed on reauthorization);

2) a *list* highlighting the major changes. (Some participants felt that side by side analyses are confusing to some audiences and this alternative format could contain the same material as a side by side.);

3) an *annotated presentation* that notes the *impact* of each major change on existing policy or procedure;

4) a *one-page list* of the major changes *arranged by date* detailing what has to be in place for each revision and the deadline for that change;

5) *mini-reports* that focus on one topic incorporating the new provisions with the parts of the old law (if any) that will remain in effect. Some of the topics suggested were:

a) discipline
b) data reporting
c) School Improvement Plans
d) IEP
e) finance/funding formulas
f) procedural safeguards

Information Needs: Presentation Format

Discussants reviewed a variety of strategies that could be used alone or in combination to transmit the information to SEA staff and others. The choice of method could be based on such factors as the imminence of deadlines, the importance of the content for state action, the specific preference of the recipient(s), or other judgments. The specific techniques discussed at this meeting were:

1) written documents sent by fax, overnight express or regular mail;

2) electronic versions sent by E-mail, file transfer or computer disk;

3) posting on Internet bulletin boards such as NASDSE's Directors' Board or Federal Board, LRPNet's Hot Docs Board, or other World Wide Web resources;

4) tape recordings (audio or video); and,

5) Braille versions.

Information Needs: Other

Attendees at this meeting also referred to other issues in the development and dissemination of information related to the reauthorization of IDEA. The writing and promulgation of revised IDEA regulations were discussed as significant concerns. Directors posed questions such as: How will stakeholders be involved in the rule-making process? What will be the time frame? How long will the entire process take from start to final approval?

Most of the discussion at this meeting, as requested, centered on the needs for information immediately following the passage of the IDEA. However, a brief reference was made to a longer range need that State Directors recognized—for analysis of the extended implications that IDEA revisions suggest. For example, what effect will the changes have on monitoring systems at the federal or state level? What will be the probable result of changes on eligibility for special education services?

Conclusion

NASDSE Board members concluded the discussion about their information needs on the topic of a reauthorized IDEA by suggesting that they should form a small working group to assure that there is consistent and effective communication between and among all special and general education individuals and groups throughout the adjustment period after passage of the new law. This group could ensure appropriate involvement of SEAs in federal activities and help avoid unnecessary problems in the implementation of the revised law.